Which History of Québec Should Be Taught to the Young Québécois of Today?

Since the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, Jocelyn Létourneau reports, Québec has been searching for a new historical narrative to transmit to its young, a new collective vision of itself, an undertaking registered in its curriculum reforms. The overarching curriculum question has been: which history of Québec should be taught to the young Québécois of today that might render intelligible the continuity of Québec society?[1] Cultural continuity, religious continuity, but also existential continuity seemed at sake, as Létourneau asks "what has been the Québecois experience from yesterday to today?" While noting that there is agreement that "the past should not be instrumentalized to the benefit of a present [or] oriented to the future," Létourneau acknowledges there are "numerous possible and acceptable histories."[2] Each society registers the meaning of its existence through the narrativization of its experience over time, Létourneau points out, a narrative that provides a coherence to what has happened and "marks the boundaries of the Self in relationship to the Other."[3]

The narrative taught to young Francophones had focused on French civilization in America, New France as the "Golden Age."[4] The courage of the settlers had been accented, facing "peril" – either "Indian" or "Protestant" (often Anglophone), forcing the "founding people to continually exceed themselves."[5] Rather than Atwood's word – survival (or *survivance*) - Létourneau affirms "perpetuation," defined as "the nation wanting to remain in the continuation of its tradition; the refusal to abdicate," an effort in which Catholicism and the French language play primary roles, especially after Québec's abandonment by France.[6]

After the Quiet Revolution, the "Self" that is the Québec nation "becomes less religious and whose problematic evolves from a nationalism of accommodation, to a nationalism of affirmation**."[7]** This is evident in the so-called "School of Québec" - a group of scholars attached to the History Institute at Laval University - which insists that Canadian society in the middle of the 18th century had been relatively "open … permeable to mutations … [not] fixed in its identity," but that the Conquest of 1759, despite its violence, did not destroy Francophone civilization, already "quite distanced from the motherland."[8] A second school - associated with three historians from the University de Montreal (M. Brunet, G. Fregault and M. Seguin) - took a different even opposite perspective, asserting that the Conquest of 1759 "broke up a society which was already on its own path," inaugurating a "long period of marginalization marked by traumatic events," including the broken rebellion of 1837-1838, the infamous Durham report,[9] the forced Union Act of 1840, the "illegitimate" creation of Canada in 1867.[10] Redemption, in this view, requires the independence of Québec.[11]

Létourneau cites the Royal Study Commission on the Teaching of History in the Province of Québec, established in 1961, issuing its report in 1964, titled "Modern

Québec," authorizing the restructuration of curriculum along secularism and progressive – "active" – lines, a reform that asks students to study as historians conduct their archival research.[12] Rather than being characterized as academic vocationalism, Létourneau suggests the reform enabled the "awakening the students to historical language and meaning."[13] Like its 1960s U.S. counterpart,[14] this reform "enjoyed … many slippages and gaps" between its prescriptions and its enactment in classrooms, as lectures continued to typify teaching and memorization typified student learning, and narrative or story (rather than "inquiry") structured both.[15]

That story, however, was no longer a "religious-national" one but, instead, a narrative of the "evolution of Québec's society, a conception incorporating all residents, even those whose language was not French and whose religion was not Christian or secular."[16] This conception is evident in a widely-used textbook during the 1970s, written under the direction of Denis Vaugeois and Jacques Lacoursiere, and titled *Canada-Québec: Synthese Historique*; it reproduces "numerous historical documents," integrating these in the storyline (containing elements of economic and social history) focussed on the "political evolution of a nation in search of itself and prevented to do so by external forces."[17]

At the start of the 1980s the Ministry of Education undertook another reform, this one (Létourneau reports) sensitive to teachers' preoccupations with "know-how" (rather than "know-what"), in effect increasing teachers' influence in the determination of objectives and content while emphasizing "competencies."[18] The resulting 1982 curriculum remained focused on "historical research" - if strengthening the role of social and economic elements - all in service to the complication of students' understanding of the "Québecois condition over time," the "narrative thread" evocative of the 1970s reform.[19] By the mid-1990s, Létourneau continues, many challenged this "story of Self," especially Gérard Bouchard, one of the most eminent historians of his generation, well-known by the public, and a separatist, who advocated a reframing of the collective narrative told to students, replacing French-Canadian exceptionalism with Québecois nationhood, a story wherein its North American character is acknowledged as more important than its European origins.[20]

Formed in 1995, the Working Group on the Teaching of History, presided by the layman historian Jacques Lacoursière, submitted in 1996 a report that called for the opening of Québec history curriculum to the study of Anglophone and Indigenous societies, detailing the roles they played in the history of Québec, a revised curriculum to be tested by student writing, assessing their "reflective and interpretive competences."[21] It would be history studied "as a mode of social and civic formation," a history very much connected to the present.[22] Criticism followed, but the recommendations of the Committee Lacoursière opened the door to important curriculum (including history) reform that acknowledged a Québec society with an even more differentiated identity, "this time on the basis of a different relation to alterity (a plural and civic Us, instead of singular and ethnic), and a new appreciation of its

historicity (the construction of a democratic society rather than an infinite series of humiliations)."[23] Between publication of these reports and the implementation of their recommendations, ten years passed, during which Québec society evolved rapidly, finding itself confronted with complexity.[24]

In Spring 2006, the Ministry of Education's curriculum reform became the subject of front-page coverage by the newspaper *Le Devoir*,[25] featuring an article emphasizing the intention to teach the history of Québec in a less political even non-nationalist way, emphasizing pluralism.[26] Intense public reaction followed, including critics who alleged that the Ministry was capitulating to Canadian-style multiculturalism and post-nationalism.[27] Létourneau judges the reform no "radical rupture," as the Ministry had no intention to "revolutionize everything," only adapt the old program to new pedagogical and historiographic developments, acknowledging the fact of globalization, directed toward the formation of "well-informed citizens."[28] Regarding the history curriculum specifically, Létourneau notes that the study of Québec society would be extended to two years, the first structured chronologically, the second thematically.[29] He characterizes the new curriculum as a "benediction" for those teachers who position history "at the heart of high-school formation," as now 200 hours – an increase of 100 hours – would be devoted to the study of Québec's history, now placed globally, alongside other nations' history, thereby "making more common Québec's trajectory."[30]

Critics were not satisfied. Létourneau reports that the Coalition for the Promotion of History, a grouping of associations and individuals, including scholars and history teachers, alleged that the new curriculum "puts in jeopardy the quality of education provided to young Québecers," as it "depoliticizes" and "denationalizes" Québec's past, underemphasizing the importance of key dates such as 1760 (the Conquest), 1840 (the Union Act), or 1867 (Confederation). For the Coalition, this history curriculum reform "marks the end of a certain idea of the Québecois sense of 'Us'."[31]

Sensitive to this critique, the Education Minister amended the curriculum revision, adding a long list of "key events" and "turning points" to counter criticism that "founding conflicts" and "structuring facts" had been "sanitized."[32] The initial revision had been structured by the following periods/events: the first inhabitants, the emergence of Canadian society, towards democracy in the British colony, the formation of the Canadian Federation; the modernization of Québec's society, the Québec of today. After the criticism, the curriculum emphasized the first inhabitants, the emergence of a society in New France, the changing of empire, Franchophone demands, grievances and struggles in the British colony, the formation of the Canadian Federation, the modernization of Québec's society, the stakes and challenges to Québec's society since 1980.[33]

"Should the history curriculum serve a cause," Létourneau asks, namely the cause of the nationalists? He adds to that cause others, among them the "acquisition

of know-how, including the development of cognitive faculties and questioning capacities," noting that increasing the critical capacity of students not does preclude the transmission of factual knowledge.[34] Even the "notion of a history for the future" requires historicization, e.g. "taking into account the crucial moments, tragic or triumphant, by which the nation of Québec defined itself."[35] History constitutes the formation of identity, both of the nation and the citizen; such a curriculum for the future, then, is one that emphasizes Francophones' "miserable past" and "glorious moments" of "national affirmation."[36] For others, including other natonalists, the revised curriculum was in tension with contemporary Québec, as its underemphasized the "pluralist" even "universalist" character of Québec, a view affirmed by Gérard Bouchard and the philosopher Charles Taylor**.** This view was, however, rejected, again invoking the fear that any "pluralist narrative" would "de-francophonize" the national past.[37] For Létourneau, the two – nationalism and pluralism – are not mutually exclusive.

COMMENTARY

Since the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, Jocelyn Létourneau reports, Québec has been revising the historical narrative to be taught to the young. The overarching curriculum question has been: which history of Québec should be taught to the young Québécois of today that might render intelligible the continuity of the Québec society? Traditionally, the answer has been one that emphasized French civilization in America, New France as the "Golden Age," accenting the courage of the settlers. Rather than Atwood's word – survival or *survivance* - Létourneau affirms "perpetuation," defined as "the nation wanting to remain in the continuation of its tradition; the refusal to abdicate," an effort in which Catholicism and the French language play primary roles, especially after Québec's abandonment by France. Létourneau provides a history of history curriculum reforms, including public controversies surrounding them, especially that of 2006, a controversy also examined (by others) in research brief #21. For Létourneau, the two – nationalism and pluralism – are not mutually exclusive.

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Endnotes

[1] Létourneau 2010, 97.

[2] Létourneau 2010, 97-98. Among these are three dominant histories, Létourneau (2010, 99, n. 2) points out, one addressed to Catholic Francophones, one addressed to Catholic Anglophones, and one addressed to Protestant Anglophones.

[3] Létourneau 2010, 98. See also Angus 1997.

[4] Létourneau 2010, 99.

[5] Létourneau 2010, 99. "The central symbol for Canada – is undoubtedly Survival, la *Survivance*," Atwood 2012 [1972], 8) observed: "For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government" (2012 [1972], 9).

[6] Létourneau 2010, 99-100.

[7] Létourneau 2010, 100-101.

[8] Létourneau 2010, 101.

[9] Durham's *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, Fierlbeck (2006, 134) explains, "is notable politically for two very important reasons: first, it stipulated the propriety of granting the liberal principles of governance to the colonies. This was no small matter. Responsible government was a step beyond colonial status to the development of formal nationhood, and it meant the clear (but not complete) attenuation of political control over Canada by Great Britain…. But the second aspect of this report was much more controversial. Durham was quite clear that the proper future for Lower Canada was assimilation. He model was Louisiana…. French Canadians were outraged and horrified."

[10] Létourneau 2010, 102.

[11] Létourneau 2010, 102.

[12] Létourneau 2010, 102-103. This seems in sync with curriculum reform in the U.S. (see Pinar 2019, 57) and with recent history curriculum reform in Canada (see Clark 2011).

[13] Létourneau 2010, 103.

[14] Pinar 2019, vii, 55, 57.

[15] Létourneau 2010, 103.

[16] Létourneau 2010, 103.

[17] Létourneau 2010, 103-104.

[18] Létourneau 2010, 104.

[19] Létourneau 2010, 104. The three (chronological) parts, Létourneau reports, are the French Regime, the English Regime and contemporary period; the seven themes: the French empire of America, Canadian society under the French regime, the Conquest and the beginnings of the British Regime, the beginnings and parliamentarism; Québec and Confederation; the industrial development; contemporary Québec.

[20] Létourneau 2010, 105-106.

[21] Létourneau 2010, 106

[22] Létourneau 2010, 106.

[23] Létourneau 2010, 107.

[24] Létourneau 2010, 107.

[25] A French-language newspaper published in Montreal and distributed in Québec and throughout Canada, *Le Devoir* was founded in 1910 by the journalist, politician, and nationalist Henri Bourassa.

[26] See research brief #21.

[27] Létourneau 2010, 109.

[28] Létourneau 2010, 109-110.

[29] Létourneau 2010, 110.

[30] Létourneau 2010, 110-111.

[31] Quoted in Létourneau 2010, 111.

[32] Létourneau 2010, 112-113.

[33] Létourneau 2010, 112-113.

[34] Létourneau 2010, 113.

[35] Létourneau 2010, 115.

[36] Létourneau 2010, 115.

[37] Létourneau 2010, 115-116.